DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 054 504 CG 006 641

AUTHOR Kapel, David E.

TITLE Counseling Needs of Environmentally Handicapped Students in Higher Education.

INSTITUTION Temple Univ., Philadelphia, Pa. Coll. of Education.

PUB DATE [71]

NOTE 12p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29

DESCRIPTORS *Career Ladders; Change Agents; *Counselor Role; *Culturally Disadvantaged; *Disadvantaged Environment; Guidance Objectives; Higher Education; Inner City; Socially Disadvantaged; *Student Needs

ABSTRACT

Typically, the student body in career ladder programs comprises inner city students, best referred to as environmentally handicapped--by such factors as health, economics, lack of political power and weak family structure. Those in higher education are considered "high risk" by institutions because their academic background differs from that of the majority of the other students. Furthermore, they are often: (1) older and more mature; (2) have stated goals; (3) have options of more movement; (4) can make more independent decisions; and (5) have more obligations (children, homes, finances) and personal problems. The total program is a period of adjustment and mediation between past and present experiences. The counselor's goal is to help such students cognitively and psychologically meet the challenges involved in entering college programs in typically white, middle-class institutions, and to help them develop to their fullest potential. Above all, his obligation is to work for institutional, program, and value changes within the system. (KS)

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The Counseling Needs of Environmentally Handicapped Students in Higher Education

For the many who felt that college was unobtainable, career ladder programs have opened a new avenue for acquiring a college education. This is particularly true for students from depressed areas of our country. It has also meant readjustments and revisions for institutions in terms of admissions, program designs, student and institutional expectations, grading, probation, working with people (community, professionals) outside their structure, as well as a general broadening of the social and racial base of the student body.

Several programs are administered by legal educational authorities (school districts) outside of higher education institutions. All Career Opportunity Programs funded by the United States Office of Education and some Veterans in Public Service Programs follow the career ladder model and are part of a public school district administrative structure. Although they deal with one or more institutions of higher learning, their staffing and funding are independent of the colleges or universitites. Staff members in such programs are directly responsible to the school system. Consequently, counselors in these programs are in a rather unusual situation. They deal with unique students who, if they successfully complete the total program, might attend more than one institution of higher learning (community-junior college than a four year college or university). Thus, these counselors must be able to work with students, faculty from one or more institutions outside

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their structure, and their own program personnel, They must be aware of and work with the many constraints imposed upon them by their own program and employer as well as those from other institutions cooperating with them. No matter how much articulation occurs among the elements within a program, there are bound to be conflicts, misunderstandings, and changes that will cause problems for students and for counselors. Conversely, personnel from the other institutions must be aware of the problems and pressures faced by their counselors and give as much assistance as possible. However, we must always be cognizant of the student who is directly affected by all elements in such programs; the point of origin is not as significant to him as is the problem. There is much commonality of needs and characteristics among students in higher education who come from depressed areas. The recognition and knowledge of these needs are important in counseling, regardless of the nature and design of special or unique programs. The student must be the center of the program, and student needs -- not institutional or program needs, must form the basis for decision making.

The uniqueness of the student body in many career ladder programs is generated by their background and locality of origin -- namely the inner-city. Ordinarily one might use the terms: "educationally disadvantaged;" "socially disadvantaged;" or "culturally disadvantaged" to describe students who come from the inner-city with less than traditionally acceptable academic background and skills. Such terms are neither fully descriptive nor accurate. Educationally disadvantaged tends to focus

on only the effects of the educational institutions (schools, churches, etc.) on students - this is too limiting; socially disadvantaged is a little better; it generally includes the interaction of social class with economics (if one were to include Social Economic Status), but it too is still very restrictive; culturally disadvantaged is the least acceptable - this is an implication of comparison with another "superior" culture. Who is in a position to evaluate one culture against another, the life-styles of individuals, their value structures, and the consistant strains that are by-products of a group's historical and social development?

Environment can be defined as the aggregate of surrounding things, conditions, or influences. Thus the counselor is faced with the concept of a collective mass; the student is a by-product of and a reaction to all the particular factors that make up his life. Handicap is any encumbrance or disadvantage that makes success more difficult. Handicap describes the end effect particular factors have on the probable success or lack of success a student will have in competing with others not from his environment in a higher educational setting. Environmentally handicapped defines the parameter and the effects of the elements within such a parameter on people. (It should be noted that not all elements within an environment have negative effects. There are many that strengthen an individual and prepare him or her for a successful and happy life.) Such a definition includes all that is implied in the terms educationally and socially disadvantaged, without the negative connotations surrounding the term culturally disadvantaged.

Environmentally handicapped includes: health; economics; lack of political power; basic psychological factors; cognitive problems; poverty; crime; weak family structure; ecology; low levels of aspirations; identity; ineffectual education, etc. as they affect an individual and generate his handicap in an academic setting. Some elements might be generating a negative effect in one setting and yet in another setting the individual might find the effect working to his advantage. The effect is a function of the need of the setting as well. An example might be the difference between competing in a college English literature course in a general education program and working in a field experience course with children in an inner-city classroom as part of a teacher preparation program; both are legitimate credit producing courses. One's experiences in his environment might not have given him the skills to read and write successfully in the literature course, yet the same experiences might enable him to relate to inner-city children and be more successful than his middle-class counterpart or even the regular classroom teacher. In one instance, the environment is a handicap, in another it is an asset. The counselor must be aware of these differences, and he must help the student handle the differences.

The environmentally handicapped student in higher educational institutions are generally found in special programs or have come in under special admissions. They are considered "high risk" by the institutions. High risk indicates that these students do not have the same traditional academic background as the majority of the students attending the school. This also implies that although committed, the program is not institutionalized. This can be an advantage in that the program is not tied

to the traditional constraints operating on other programs at the institution. This gives directors and counselors more flexibility; however, unless thought through and planned, if and when the high risk student merges with the regular program, significant cognitive and psychological dissonance can be generated that could destroy the student as well as the program. With the tight money market in higher education, high risk programs become vulnerable to budget cuts. It is quite possible that amalgamation with regular programs will start before students or programs are prepared. This will put an added burden on the counselors in such situations. No matter how desirable it is to institutionalize flexible admission policies, adequate counseling and academic support, make college programs more relevant, and expand the cultural and social base of the student body, it is also important that individual students with environmental handicaps be able to compete successfully. It is the goal of the counselor to help such students cognitively and psychologically meet such challenges. It should be remembered that almost all of the 2500+ institutions of higher learning in the United States (and their staffs) are basically white middle-class oriented, and unless a major social, political, and economic revolution occurs in this country - they will stay that way. No value judgments are intended, but that is a fact of life. Therefore, the counselor will have to adjust to this or pay the consequence (more than likely, it will be the student who will suffer). Some institutions and individual professors are changing - unfortunately they are few in number; it is the philosophy and goals of higher education that must change. The next question is obvious: who is to determine the change and in what

direction? Change is generally slow; any counselor hoping for dramatic and sudden changes is not being realistic - he must work within the constraints of the educational system for the good of the students while he simultaneously works for change. He must know the expectations and goals of the particular higher education unit. He must be realistic - for knowledge of the "real world" (in this case the higher education institution) will enhance the probability of academic success. It is also imperative that the institution be made cognizant of the "real world" in order to enhance the probability of success for its graduates.

Counselors have the major problem of trying to work with students who are worlds apart from those generally found in higher education. The description of children in the public schools from low S.E.S. and high population density areas (generally called inner-city) is not too different from those now counseled in special college programs. The higher education students differ from inner-city school children in at least these five areas: 1. They are older and more mature, consequently they have more extensive experiences; 2. They have at least stated goals; 3. They have options of more movement; 4. They can make more independent decisions; and 5. They have more obligations (children, homes, family, finances) and personal problems. These five characteristics are significant and must be understood by counselors.

Being older and more mature can have a positive effect. Having gone through the service, or just plain living in depressed areas, can help students see their goals more clearly. It could also reinforce their feelings of alienation, lack of control over their lives, hatred for

the present system, inadequacy, etc. These feelings are real and must be dealt with by students and counselors. Often, professors are not aware of such feelings - problems occur because of the social, cultural, and intellectual gap existing between them and the environmentally handicapped student.

Stated goals and real goals can be two different entities. Unless the stated and real are identical, the student will be having cognitive and psychological conflicts. The motivation hoped for and generated by goals will not exist. The counselor must be perceptive enough to be able to get a student to identify his real goals, and then have him make decisions based on them. A student who wants to be in the College of Business Administration rather than the College of Education might be reasonably successful - but how much more success would he meet if he were in the curriculum that met his real needs (given that all other things being equal)? It is also important that counselors help students determine how realistic their real goals are in relationship to probability of success; they must help him make decisions as to courses of action. It will do no one any good, if a student does not have the ability and motivation to move in a direction that he finds himself. A student who doesn't have the innate ability to do college level work, and would not be able to do so regardless of all the support supplied, should be counseled into another area. <u>At no time should the counselor make the decision</u>, but he should provide the student with as much objective input as possible.

Unlike public school students, who must wait until a certain age to drop-out, the student in higher education can drop-out or in some cases change programs almost at will. This creates problems for counseling since the realities of our society might greatly restrict the movement these students believe they have. Even within institutions, the ease of movement is greatly reduced - with different program requirements, loss of credit, admission requirements, etc. Admission into an institution, doesn't imply admission into all programs within the institutions. Both the counselors and students must be aware of such constraints. When a student elects to drop-out of school altogether, does the counselor have any further obligations to that student? Within economic and time feasibility, the adjustment out of the program should be of concern to the counselor. He is still dealing with an individual. Separation (before successful completion) programs could also aid in recruitment. If individuals realize that a program is interested in the total person, before and after, it is telling them something about the worth of people held by the program. However, the first obligation of counselors is to those in the program. The counselor's duty is to help students evaluate the options of movement available to him realistically; make him aware of the consequences that could occur when selecting one option over another.

Another aspect of movement occurs when students begin to exercise the sundry selections available to them within a program and/or an institution. Course loads and teacher selection in many programs are variable. This becomes crucial when programs are not self-contained

or highly structured. The over-loading of students when they are not ready can cause considerable damage. The improper mix of courses (e.g., too many reading-type courses) can also create problems. Faculty selection implies faculty evaluation. A counselor has an obligation to evaluate faculty in terms of work load, objectives, and sensitivity. The adjustment to the needs of the student is also crucial; the counselor must be aware of both areas as input for student decision making. The counselor is not evaluating a faculty member in terms of good or bad, but in terms of students' needs, aspirations, and abilities. How the counselor makes his evaluations is vital - it should be more than student perceptions. Classroom observations, follow-up of students in terms of how well they are doing in advanced related courses, conversations with the faculty member, looking at old tests, printed course requirments of the professor, etc. are all possible ways of evaluation. One should keep in mind that a sensitive but hard marker is better than an insensitive easy grader. The objective of taking a course is personal growth and knowledge (cognitive, affective, psychomotor) not just the grade. It is foolish to assume that grade point average is not important - it is the extreme professor, the unrealistic professor, the insensitive professor that is to be culled out of a student's program.

As a mature student, who in most cases has been out in the world, the need to make independent decisions is great. Coupled with this is the fact that they have had experience making decisions on their own. They don't want to be told what to do and how to do it. Decision

making involves the total spectrum of control over one's present and future, as well as individual and group identity (e.g., Black Pride, male or female self-esteem, etc). Values and life styles are also involved. Rejection of traditional institutional requirements (course requirements, dorm life) is the stance now being taken by middle-class college students, students who are environmentally handicapped are equally vocal in their rejection of such requirements. In many cases, these students are more sensitive to patronizing situations than their more affluent classmates. The counselor must be accepting of these and other personal views and values. (He need not philosophically agree with them.) When an impass occurs for the student in the academic environment, the counselor must help mediate the differences. If a solution cannot be worked out, he must be honest with the student. Ultimately, the student has the option to move on. The counselor also has an obligation to work for institutional, program, and value changes within the system. For, if the counselor moves out of the system, then the positive consequences and ultimate influence for change might be drastically decreased. This is also true for the student.

Many children from the inner-city come from families that are headed by parents who are similar to the students in high risk college programs. The counselor must be aware of the personal problems that can and do interfere with academic success. Because a person is enrolled in a college program doesn't make him a middle-class individual, with middle-class values, and middle-class experiences.

The handling of money, the relationships among husband-wife and children, dress, network of friends, value of maintaining grades, hostility towards authority and regulations, welfare funding, housing, allocation of time, space, and money for the academic program, time and physical space for studying, respect for others, turning in assignments on time, accepting regulations set by the institution or professor, etc. are just a few of the areas that could cause students trouble as they move through the program. <u>There is no period of adjustment</u>. For the student from the handicapped environment, his total program is a period of adjustment and mediation between his past and present experiences. As he moves along, hopefully he will find it easier to adjust his value system and life-style to enable him to compete in the academic environment. Students who are seniors will still need help - hopefully not as much as the freshman. The counselor must be aware that the purpose of the academic experience is not to make these students "middle-calss", but to develop them to their fullest potential. Thus the middle-class value system held by many counselors is not really compatible with those held by students in the program. A recognition that this might or does exist will help the counselor work with the students as he moves through the program.

The specific academic deprivations such as: reading, mathematic, and studying skills are not being discussed. It is assumed that the development of such skills, and others that are needed to meet success in the academic setting, are part of the program available to

the student. If they are not, then one must question the commitment of the program to the students, for the probability of success will be quite low. No counselor should work under such conditions, and no such program is defensible.

There are many college level programs that exist (e.g., teacher preparation, social welfare, health care, police science) where the student from the environmentally handicapped situation is not disadvantaged, because the foci of such programs are on producing educated and trained individuals to work with the people affected by the social, economic, and educational blights that exist in the United States, and to produce committed and sensitive problem solvers who will work on answers to the pressing issues that are effecting our national stability and progress. In many such programs the teacher, the university professor and the counselor are the ones who are environmentally handicapped.

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